

Little Pockets of Upturned Loneliness by orphan_account

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Summary:

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Little Pockets of Upturned Loneliness

Months pass, and nothing bad happens to Will.

It makes sense. Of course it makes sense--what's happened to him, it isn't normal. None of it is. Portals to other dimensions don't just *open*. One of your best friends doesn't accidentally adopt an interdimensional hellhound as a pet. Mike's girlfriend shouldn't have the same skillset that Jean Grey does. Will shouldn't have spent a week in a nightmare realm, and then a year later get possessed by some fucking shadow monster.

But all of it *did* happen, as much as he'd like to pretend that it didn't. His mom still won't let him go anywhere alone, and Jonathan gives him at least three minute-long hugs per day. Hell, even Mike won't let Will out of his sight, which seems to stretch him thin, because he refuses to let El go, either. Will has to put his foot down when Mike tries to take Will on his date with El. (Even then, Mike calls the house later. He says it's just to talk, but Will *knows* Mike's double-checking.)

In fact, no one will let him out of their sights. Even El seems on edge when she's around him, like she's constantly watching for any kind of danger around them. Max does the same thing, and it's so fucking unfair because they're new to the friend group. It's bad when Mike, Lucas and Dustin are watching him, but it's somehow infinitely worse when it's El and Max.

It gets to the point that Will feels like he's about to snap.

When he says he's going to the bathroom, someone says they'll go with him. When he's sleeping, someone comes to check on him. It's exhausting, even if he understands instinctively *why*. But it makes him feel like a freak, and he doesn't care what Jonathan says. He'd give anything, literally *anything*, to make it normal again.

It all falls apart with the most normal thing, is probably the most ironic part of it.

It's two months after the Shadow Monster, and they're walking out of the middle school when Will trips down the last two steps. He lands on his knees and lets out a little grunt of pain as he sits up, slinging his backpack to the side so he can roll up his jeans and check over his legs.

It's at that exact moment when Mike grabs Will's shoulder and chin, jerking Will to look at Mike. His face looks wild, and he says, "Are you okay? Are you hurt? What happened? Are you--?"

"God, Mike, I'm *fine*," Will snaps out, making Mike blink in surprise. "I just tripped, seriously." He blinks, and realizes that Dustin, Lucas, and Max are crowded around him, too. He looks to the right, and his heart sinks as he sees Jonathan standing on the sidewalk, staring at Will, too.

Will bites his lip so hard, he draws blood. Then he stands up abruptly. "I'm going to the bathroom," he says.

"I'll go with you--"

"*Alone*," Will bites out, glaring at Dustin. Dustin hesitates, and Will stares Dustin down, daring him to argue.

None of them do, not even Jonathan.

Will wipes the blood away from his lip and balls his hands into fists. He makes his way up the stairs carefully, just in case Mike decides that the world's ending if Will stubs his toe or something.

What Will does next is dumb.

Very, very dumb, but at this point, Will thinks that he's entitled to stupidity.

The bathroom next to Mr. Salerno's has a window, and it's easy to

open it and slip right on out. Way too easy, actually, someone should probably get that fixed.

Will makes for the woods, knowing that no one will think he went there. Not at first.

He wanders around aimlessly, breathing deeply and trying to think. His thoughts flit by quickly and quietly, and he can't seem to catch them, can't seem to focus and create a plan.

He knows that they'll find him eventually. If it gets really serious, they'll get El to look for him, and she'll find him in seconds flat. But that's okay. He doesn't want to leave, not completely, not yet. But he needs this. He needs time to just breathe and not have someone waiting anxiously for the next breath.

Time passes like water as he walks. He lets it wash over him, lets it sweep him along as he crunches leaves under his feet. He wonders if he'll get lost in the woods. *Ha*, he thinks. *At least this time, it'll be for real.*

The woods around him start to look more familiar, and he realizes it's because he's getting close to the quarry. He makes his way up to the hard-packed gravel path and pauses at the top.

This is where they found his fake body, he remembers. He's only been to the quarry a few times, but it's not such a bad place. They shouldn't have tried to ruin it with an ugly memory like that, he thinks. They could've just tossed the body in a swamp. Someplace deep and dark and muddy, rather than a quiet, lovely quarry.

He sits down cross-legged on the rocky lip of the quarry, and breathes deep. He has no idea how much time has passed, but likely it's been an hour or two. They're probably looking for him now, might be pushing El to look for him now. He could probably make his way home now. He knows the way, but he doesn't want to give this up. This peace, this quiet.

Will thinks that the worst part about it all, is that it's reasonable. It's

reasonable that they'd be worried sick about him twenty-four-seven. Hell, he feels it, too. He's taken to sleeping on his stomach, because his mom can't hear his screams if it's muffled by his pillow. She keeps thinking that they're real, every little bit. Like they're prophecies or something, but they're not. Will knows the difference between simple fear and real danger, now.

He closes his eyes, and he breathes deep.

He hears footsteps approaching behind him, and he forces himself to not react. They're careful and slow, and he knows it's El, so he doesn't turn around and he doesn't open his eyes.

"Will?" she asks.

Will takes another deep breath and releases it slowly. He opens his eyes and uncrosses his legs. "El," he says, turning to look back at her.

She's alone, which is surprising. He was pretty sure everyone he knew would be here, looking for him.

"Where are you?" she asks carefully, and Will tries not to groan.

"At the quarry," he says, "and it's not the Upside Down. You're El, and I have my memory and I am *not possessed*."

He tries his best not to yell at her, but it's a near thing.

She doesn't seem bothered, though. She just makes her way to the rocky edge of the quarry and sits down next to him.

"I know I shouldn't have done that," Will says. "You know, running away. But I really was--am--gonna come back. I just...needed some time."

"Mike told me you yelled at him," El says. "He also said that you never, ever do that. He says the only time he's ever seen you angry is when you were possessed by that...thing."

Will rubs at the back of his neck. "I'm really angry," he admits. "All

the time, I just--I dunno, you guys don't deserve that. So. I'm sorry."

"You don't deserve it either, you know," El says. "Everything that happened to you. You don't deserve it."

"Yeah, I know."

"Do you?" El asks softly.

"I--" Will stops for a second, before letting out a huff of laughter. "You know what? Fuck it," he says. "I think that I'm gay."

El turns to look at him. "What is 'gay'?"

Will swallows. "It means that I like boys, instead of girls. Even though I am a boy. So it's a special term for people like me."

El blinks. "Okay," she says. "But you're changing the subject."

"Am not," Will says.

"Are too," El says, and she smiles at him.

"Don't tell anyone, though," Will says. "About the gay thing."

"Secret?" El asks.

"Yeah," Will says. "A secret."

"Okay," she says. Then, "we should probably head back."

"Yeah," Will sighs. "We probably should."

His mom hugs him so tightly he can't breathe, when he gets back.

Max, Dustin, Lucas and Mike all individually check over him, as if trying to make sure the others didn't miss anything. Jonathan looks unaccountably guilty for losing track of Will, as if Will was stolen away instead of taking off, and Hopper eyes him angrily and tells him

to never make your mother worry like that, ever again.

And Will...well.

He deals with the attention and accepts extra hugs from his mom, and then he goes to his bedroom. He leaves the door open because his mom would probably suffer from another heart attack if he closed it.

He sits down on the edge of his bed and stares at the opposite wall. He breathes in and out and works through every muscle in his body, tensing and untensing, just to make sure he's still in control.

There's a light knock on his door, and Will turns his head to see Mike. He's hesitating, wringing his hands.

Will sighs, and shifts so that he's lying down on the bed. "What?" he asks.

Will feels the bed move as Mike sits down, too. "I wanna talk."

"About what?"

Mike swallows. "You haven't ever...talked about the possession. About everything that happened. What do you remember?"

Will feels a surge of hot, bloody anger tear through his chest, and he fights to control his breathing. He settles for sitting upright and staring Mike right in the face.

"There's a reason for that," he says. "It's because I don't remember anything."

"Not a single thing," Mike says.

"Yes."

"I don't believe you."

“You really don’t have to,” Will says bitterly.

“Yeah, that’s another thing,” Mike says, and it makes Will’s blood boil, the fact that Mike isn’t even trying to fight back. “I’ve never, ever seen you angry before. I didn’t even think that was an emotion you *had*. ”

“So?”

“So, what happened?” Mike asks him earnestly, and he stares at Will with those big, deep brown eyes, and suddenly Will feels everything snap, break in him, as he tries to process Mike’s words.

“You’re asking me what *happened*,” Will says lowly. “To make me this way. What *happened*.”

He pushes himself off of his bed and starts pacing. “What *happened*,” Will repeats. He’s seeing red, and he can hear, somewhere in the back of his head, Mike starting to speak, but that’s not important. What’s important is what’s on the tip of his tongue, what he’s going to say next, what he *has* to say next.

“As if--as if all of this is a dream. As if this isn’t my fucking *life*. And of course I fucking remember what happened Mike, because why wouldn’t I. Life has never, ever been that nice to me. Do you know what it’s like, to not be in control of yourself? To have something trying to hunt your *friends*, your family--and--and there’s nothing you can do? Just some fucking morse code? I wanted you guys to kill me,” Will’s voice broke. “I killed Bob and--and I almost killed you guys too, and sometimes I just think it’d be easier if you’d left me in the Upside Down because I’m just poisonous, Mike.

“I--I am. I ruin everything I touch, and I knew that, I ruined my mom’s marriage and I fucking killed Barbara and I almost killed you guys, too, and I *killed Bob*. I remember him dying, you know that? I wasn’t even awake but I remember killing him and I remember feeling happy about it. And you guys--you won’t even let me out of your sights now, and I attract death everywhere I look, Mike. I’m so dangerous and you’re acting like you’re protecting me from the danger.

“So of course I’m fucking *angry*, Mike. I’m so angry at myself and-- and you guys won’t let me have any space and I can’t--just. Why can’t you just *leave me alone?! Why can’t you just protect yourselves for once in your goddamn lives?!*”

He doesn’t even realize he’s been crying until Mike pulls Will into his arms and makes shushing noises. He also doesn’t realize that his door was open and that he’d been *shouting* until several people pile in and hug him too, and Will tries hard to stop sobbing, but Mike whispers in his ear, “It’s all okay, Will. Every little bit of it.”

Which just makes him break even more.

El takes to coming over to Will’s house when Hopper does.

And Hopper comes over a *lot*, because he and his mom are in some weird in-between stage where they’re not a couple but they’re also not *not* a couple, so the whole thing is a little strange and uncomfortable.

El’s visits make Will feel better, somehow.

Maybe because she’s been through worse stuff than him, or maybe because she doesn’t feel the need to fill silence like Mike and Dustin. Instead, she just watches him draw. Sometimes she brings books with her, because Hopper’s trying to teach her everything she doesn’t know before she goes back to school.

As it turns out, that’s a lot of stuff, and so she gets Will to help her with it.

After he teaches her how to factor quadratics, she says, “You’re really

smart, you know.”

Will shrugs. “Nah, I’ve just been in school a little longer than you.”

“No,” she says. “You’re smart. You hid from a Demogorgon for a week without being found.”

“I got caught,” Will says.

“So did everyone else,” she says. “But you lived.”

Will looks down at his drawing, and El takes that as a cue to keep working on her homework.

About an hour later, she says, “You figured out how to talk to your family, even when the shadow monster didn’t think you could.”

Will blinks. “I saw that in a movie, once.”

“You taught yourself Morse code,” she persists.

“What’s your point?” Will asks.

“You were resourceful,” she says. “Both times. You stayed hidden instead of attacking, and you warned your family when you could. You did more than most people could. You weren’t useless, and you weren’t dangerous. Just unlucky.”

Will looks down at his drawing and shades in the trees.

“Will,” El says, and he looks up.

She has a strange intensity in her eyes, the kind that reminds him that she’s not just some normal girl with abnormal powers. She’s seen things, done things.

“I opened the gate,” she says. “I caused all of this to happen. Literally *everything*. Is it my fault?”

“No,” Will says reflexively.

She looks at him. “Why?”

“Because,” Will says. “You didn’t mean for it to happen, and you tried to fix your mistakes.”

“Then why are you blaming yourself, if you did the exact same things?”

Will looks down at his paper and clears his throat. “El,” he says. “Can you just...leave it? For now?”

“For *now*, ” she says, and Will suppresses a groan.

The third time that Will skips a DnD campaign, Mike corners him at school.

“Why are you skipping?” he asks. “We need a cleric.”

“Just keep getting Max to fill in for me,” Will says carelessly, picking out textbooks from his locker.

“She’s our zoomer,” Mike says.

“Yeah but that’s not even a thing,” Will says.

“She’s a genuinely terrible cleric.”

“How can you be a bad cleric? It’s just a stupid board game.”

“Just a *stupid board game*?” Mike says as Will shuts his locker. “You wound me, Byers.”

Will starts to walk away, but Mike catches Will’s arm and drags him

away to the A/V room.

“Alright,” Mike says. “Talk to me.”

“Yeah, because that’s worked so well in the past.”

“Sarcasm isn’t a good look on you,” Mike says, punching Will lightly in the shoulder. “What happened to sweet little Will Byers?”

Will sighs. “Look, I’m just not that interested in Dungeons & Dragons anymore, okay Mike?”

“Yeah, but it’s not just that,” Mike says. “You’ve been avoiding everyone at school. I know you’re hanging out with El, but talk to me. Friends don’t lie to each other.”

“Oh my god,” Will says. “I knew it was you who taught El that stupid phrase, but it’s just weird coming from you.”

“Will.”

Will casts around for anything to get Mike off his back. He’s tired and he feels constantly trapped and hurt, like Nancy’s still burning him with that iron poker, and that’s probably why he settles on the worst thing to say ever: “I’m gay, Mike.”

Mike’s eyes go comically wide. “You--what--?”

Will’s out of the door before Mike can even wrap his head around that.

So. Probably not the smartest thing that Will’s done.

But that’s okay, because right after, he manages to fall into the Upside Down.

He always forgets the peeling, aching quality of the air until he breathes it in. He always forgets the grumbling sounds of it until something chitters.

But he never forgets the chest-deep fear coating the entirety of the place. Will's not scared of much, after everything--but this place, it will always scare him the most, lodge itself deep in his chest like an infection.

Will walks through the corridors, letting the flaking air settle deep in his lungs. He keeps walking, kicking over vegetation, before reaching a janitor's closet that he settles into.

He wraps himself up in his arms and breathes deep, counts up to ten and then back down again and then back up again, over and over.

Something raps on the door, and when Will snaps his head, he's back in his world, breathing air tinged with cleaning supplies and bleach.

Will pushes open the door to find Dustin staring back at him. Dustin blinks, taking in Will and how he's crouched in the janitor's closet, and Will immediately says, "It wasn't an episode, I promise."

Dustin frowns at him. "Mike's really worried about you," he says, "*and* I find you hiding from something I can't see. Excuse me for jumping to conclusions."

"Mike would tell you if it was an episode," Will says, standing up and coming out of the closet (ha).

Dustin tilts his head, before accepting Will's argument. "Okay," he says. "So what happened between the two of you that caused you to actually hide from your problems?"

"I can't tell you," Will says, before something clicks in his brain. "Wait, Mike's not, like...he doesn't, um, hate me or anything right now?"

Dustin blinks. “Jeez, what happened with the two of you?”

Will sighs. “Ask Mike,” he says vaguely. “I gotta get to class.”

Will had, rather foolishly, thought that he was safe from the episodes, after everything had happened.

He really should’ve known.

Still, it was his first one in a long, long time, and it’d lasted five minutes, tops.

All of these seem like perfectly reasonable justifications for hiding it from his friends.

He manages to dodge his friends for the rest of the day, and thankfully, A/V club wasn’t that afternoon. So Jonathan pulls up and Will’s ready, this time alone. He’d gotten out a few minutes before his friends on purpose, knowing that they’d lose him in the crowd.

Jonathan notices that Will’s alone, and asks him about it.

Will shrugs. “I had a fight with Mike,” he says.

Jonathan just nods, and pulls away from the curb.

Mike comes by Will’s house thirty minutes after Will gets home.

It's actually a little surprising, just because Will figured that Mike would be so surprised and disgusted that he'd avoid Will for at least a week. In fact, Will had kind of been banking on that.

Still, when his mom gets the door, it's Mike, panting and eyes wild. "Where's Will? I need to see him."

His mom blinks in surprise and glances back to Will, who's sitting at the kitchen table. She gives him a questioning look, and Will sighs and walks to the door. Mike's eyes widen, almost impossibly, and he gives Will a long, searching look.

"Let's talk," Will says. "Outside."

"What--?" his mom asks, but Will says, "it'll be only a few minutes, Mom," and shuts the front door.

Mike immediately starts pacing around the front porch, something he only does when he's nervous and needs to think. "Okay," Mike says. "Okay."

Will watches him, leaning back against his front door.

"Alright," Mike says, and pauses for a second. "Did you mean it?"

"Which part?" Will asks, aiming for oblivious.

Mike gives him a withering glance. It's actually a bit strange. Will doesn't think Mike's ever given him that kind of look. Lucas and Dustin, sure, but not Will.

"Okay," Will sighs. "Yes. I did."

Mike's pacing picks up speed. "Who else knows?"

"El," Will says. "That's it."

Mike turns on his heel to look at Will. "El?"

Will shrugs. "I dunno. She found me that day I ran away, and so I told her."

"Why did you tell me?" Mike asks. "Why now?"

Will looks down at the porch floorboards and doesn't say anything. He feels his heartbeat start to pick up speed.

"Oh," Mike says distantly. "*Oh.*"

Will scuffs his Converse against the floorboards, and Mike says, "God, you're a real asshole."

Will blinks, and looks up at Mike. His face is set, stony, and he's closed the distance between them.

"I know you're figuring things out," Mike says. "And I've been trying to be so fucking patient, but you--God. You tried to use your sexual orientation against me as a weapon. Like I'm so fucking homophobic that I'd be *disgusted*. What the *hell* is wrong with you."

Will stares at Mike. His chest feels tight and loose at the same time, and he doesn't even know what that means, but it makes his shoulders lower and his back stiffen. He stares at Mike silently.

"If you just wanted to be left alone," Mike says. "You could've just fucking said so. I'd've been more than happy to."

Mike shakes his head, and steps off Will's porch. Will just lets him, feeling nothing at all.

Will asks to skip the next day at school. It makes him feel like a coward, but his mom agrees. Will spends most of the day coloring in a drawing of a big, gnarled tree. Its roots are black and inky, and snake off the page in quick strokes of his pencil.

El calls their house that night.

“You upset Mike,” is the first thing she says to him.

Will sighs. “Why is he upset?”

“It probably has something to do with the fact that you tried to drive him away with a personal fact about you,” El says dryly. The more time she spends with Hopper, the meaner she gets, really.

“What do you want me to do about it?”

“Apologize,” El says.

Will groans, and hangs up on her.

The problem is, Will knows that he’s in the wrong.

He knows he has to apologize. Of course he does, it just...

Will had no idea what he was doing. All he knew was that he was afraid, and because of that he was angry, and because he was angry he wasn’t any fun to be around for his friends, and because of that he was even more afraid because he thought that he’d lose them. It kept swirling around and around in his head, getting more and more convoluted and ugly and messy. Will didn’t even know how to fix it, and so he tried pushing everyone away, but he hurt everyone he cared about in the process. It went around and around in his head, making him feel distant and poisonous and *wrong*.

The phone rings again, and Will ignores it. He rips apart his drawing of his tree, instead. He always hated the twisting look of roots.

Will goes back to school the next day.

He sees Mike standing at his locker. He looks pale and drawn, but Will doubts that he's the reason why.

Will shoves his books into his locker, and slams it shut a little harder than necessary.

By lunchtime, Will decides that he needs to apologize.

Just because it's the right thing to do. Otherwise, he'd probably regret it, later on.

Will waits until Dustin, Lucas and Max are in line for lunch, and slides into the seat next to Mike. Mike frowns at him, and doesn't say anything at all. Will decides he does not care, not even a little bit.

"I wanted to say that I'm sorry," Will says. "It was wrong for me to think that you'd, uh, have certain opinions that you don't. So I'm sorry."

Will makes to get up, but Mike grabs Will's wrist. "That's *it*?"

Will blinks. "Isn't that...what you wanted?"

Mike almost scowls. "What about trying to push away literally everyone who cares about you? And lying about what's wrong with you? And literally revealing vulnerable things about yourself, like you're *trying* to get people to lash out at you for them?"

Will pulls his wrist free from Mike. "I don't see what that has to do with our fight."

“Will,” Mike says. “It’s like you’re trying to destroy yourself, and I want you to stop.”

“I can’t--Mike, it doesn’t work that way.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not trying to--look. I just. I just wanted to apologize. Okay? I’ll leave you alone now.”

“I don’t want that,” Mike says.

“You literally said yesterday on the porch that you’d be more than happy to leave me alone,” Will says sharply. “I’m just trying to listen to you.”

He gets up and leaves the cafeteria. Instead, he goes to the library and finds a copy of the Hobbit, holing himself up in the corner.

After school, Dustin manages to catch up with Will before he can leave with Jonathan.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Dustin asks.

“A good fucking question,” Will says tiredly, and Dustin says, “That’s exactly what I’m talking about! You never used to cuss, and you’ve never, ever gotten in a fight with any of us. Especially Mike, of *all* people.”

Will grabs hold of his bangs and tugs on them. He tenses every muscle in his body, relaxes, and breathes. Finally, he says, “I know I’m being selfish.”

“*What?*” Dustin asks.

“The only thing I can think about is the Upside Down,” Will says. “And--and I have to check five times a day to make sure I’m in control of my own body. Look, I just--I know that I’m not the best person to be around right now, and I don’t--I’m no fun, okay, and I’ll drag you guys down, and--and you’ll probably get in trouble because of me, at some point, and I’m just trying to...I’m trying my best, I really am. So, just, leave me alone. I know that’s what you guys want, and it’ll be better for me, too.”

Jonathan honks his horn, and Will says, “I gotta go. Thanks for trying, okay? I’m really sorry. Really, I am.”

He climbs into the car and scrubs at his eyes with his sleeve quickly. Jonathan looks over, but doesn’t say anything. Just tells Will that he can pick the music station, this time.

That night, the doorbell rings incessantly. When his mom opens the door, five kids are waiting on the other side, looking desperate.

“We need to see Will,” they say, and Joyce just lets them in.

Will looks at the determined faces of all his friends, and appropriately says, “Oh, shit.”

Mike marches right up to Will, and pulls him into the tightest hug Will’s ever experienced.

Then, just as quickly, he releases and drags Will into his bedroom, all the kids following behind them. El shuts the door, and Mike says softly, “I need to know. Were you trying to commit suicide? When you told us to close the gate?”

The question steals Will’s breath away.

He doesn't know the answer, actually.

He knew--he knew deep, deep down, that he'd probably die when the gate closed. But he hadn't known how to tell them that, through Morse code. It would take too long, and the monster would notice and take over, fooling them yet again.

And yet, a smaller, tinier part of his brain in that moment had wondered if it wouldn't be such a bad thing. If maybe it wouldn't hurt, and maybe stop bad things from happening to the people he cared about.

Mike's looking at him, and his eyes are dark and he can feel everyone else's eyes on him too. And he's so tired, and he thinks that Mike already knows the answer. So Will just says, "Maybe. I don't know."

Mike just nods, but Will feels a hand on his shoulder, and when he turns, it's Lucas. He squeezes gently, and refuses to move it.

"I'm sorry," Mike says.

"What for?" Will asks.

"It was unfair of me to expect you to just bounce back from this," Mike says. "I know how hard you've been trying, but I thought you could try harder. But it's not--it's not about that. It's about time, and it's about convincing you that everything will be okay. So I'm really sorry."

Will shakes his head. "No," he says. "You're right. I've been selfish, and so focused on myself, and we've all seen a lot, so I'm sorry."

"I think the point is," Lucas says, "we've all been a little bit dumb. Some of us more than others, but it's been harder for you and for El than for the rest of us, and we forgot about that."

Will sucks in a deep breath. "Look," he says. "I-I still have nightmares. And episodes to the Upside Down sometimes. And..." he looks at Mike and El. "I have things that I can't admit to, yet. But I'll try, okay? Just. Give me space sometimes. I'm sorry that I haven't

been there for you guys, but I will be. I promise.”

El smiles at him encouragingly, and Lucas squeezes his shoulder again. Max stares at him inscrutably, and Mike all but tackles Will in a hug as Dustin says, “Will you *please* be our cleric now?”

And Will feels something release out of him. Feels his shoulders unlock, and his breath come out steady.

And he feels better.

Not good, not yet. But better.